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AUTHOR George, Carol; Solomon, Judith
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ABSTRACT

A total of 14 kindergarten children participated in a story completion task in which they used doll play to enact a series of stories about family events. The children's mothers completed the Adult Attachment Interview, which measures adults' perceptions of their childhood family relationships. Doll play and interviews were rated for rejection and supportive partnership. The analysis first focused on intergenerational continuity. No correlation was found between children's representations of family interaction in doll play and their mothers' memories of family interaction. However, when mothers were divided into groups of those who had and had not received therapy, correlations were found for mothers in the nontherapy group and their children. The second analysis considered differentiation of relationships. Results indicated that children and mothers failed to differentiate between the quality of parent-child and spousal relationships. Results also indicated that, in general, children of mothers who had received therapy displayed in their doll play relationships more supportive relationships than those their mothers reported having in their childhoods. This was true for parent-child and spousal relationships, and for children who were classified as secure, avoidant, and ambivalent in attachment. (BC)

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Intergenerational Transmission of the Family System: Children's Representations of the Family in Doll Play

Carol George

Mills College

Judith Solomon

Center for the Family in Transition

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Intergenerational Transmission of the Family System: Children's Representations of the Family in Doll Play

One of the emerging questions in the field of child development centers on the mechanisms by which family relationships are conserved and passed on to future generations. Traditionally, continuity has been explained as a linear unidirectional process mediated by imitation and reinforcement. Although these social learning theory principles may explain the child's continuation of discrete aspects of their parent's behavior, recent research suggests that continuity is mediated by indirect mechanisms that organize a child's experience within the context of relationships.

Bowlby's concept of the internal working model is one such mechanism that has been applied by attachment theorists to explain continuity of relationships. This concept has been described in detail by Bowlby, Bretherton, Main, and Sroufe. Briefly, an internal working model is an organized, coherent mental representation of the self, the other and the relationship which is derived from the child's experiences with the attachment figure. Because new relationships, feelings, and thoughts are assimilated to pre-existing models, these models are resistant to change and have the capacity to influence interpersonal behavior and the interpretation of social experience throughout the life span.

How is this concept used to explain intergenerational transmission? Theory and research suggest that the mental representation of attachment developed during childhood guides the individual's behavior in future relationships, particularly the parent-child relationship. Thus, as the parent interacts with her child, the child simultaneously constructs her own representation of experience. This reasoning

suggests that under normal circumstances the child develops a complementary model to that of the parent, resulting in some degree of continuity across generations.

Bowly proposes that change occurs only when current experience fails to fit the existing framework and can no longer be defensively excluded. At the risk of mental instability, the individual is forced to consciously re-examine and modify existing models. A few studies suggest that models are re-examined and potentially altered when individuals experience a marked change in attachment relationships, for example, the loss of an attachment figure or the development of a qualitatively different relationship.

Research to date has examined intergenerational transmission within a single dyadic relationship. Although dyads are critically important, family systems theorists remind us that development occurs in the broader context of the family. Little attention has been paid, however, to questions of intergenerational transmission of individuals' representations of the family system. Judith Solomon and I have been working with a method to investigate children's internal working models of attachment, especially attachment to the mother, using a family doll play paradigm. Here we ask whether the same paradigm can give us information regarding continuity between the mother's and the child's representations of the family. Following Hinde, we assume that mental models of the family are a complex synthesis of representations of dyadic relationships -- that is, mother-child, father-child, spousal, and sibling dyads -- and relationships among dyads.

The data to be presented are preliminary and exploratory. This study was done in response to our invitation to participate in this symposium. The sample was comprised of 14 middle class kindergarten-age children and their mothers, 10 girls and 4 boys, living in Oakland and Berkeley, California and seen in our laboratory at Mills College. The children represented a full range of traditional attachment

classifications: 5 secure, 5 avoidant, and 4 ambivalent. As part of a larger study, children were seen in a separation-reunion laboratory session with their mothers. During the separation, children participated in a modified version of Inge Bretherton and Doreen Ridgeway's Attachment Story Completion Task. In this semistructured task, children first chose a family and were then guided by an adult companion through a series of stories about family events, for example, adopting a pet, or the child getting hurt while playing. Two weeks following the laboratory session mothers were interviewed using the Adult Attachment Interview.

Optimally, analyses of the family context should encompass all dyads in the family system. In this study, however, we examined representations of only parent-child and spousal dyads because we did not have systematic information regarding other family members.

Our analysis centers on three aspects of family experience that have been shown in previous studies to be related strongly to attachment security: loving, rejection, and dyadic partnership. The mother's perception of her own parents as loving and rejecting were rated from her Adult Attachment Interview using 9-point scales developed by Main and Goldwyn. The loving scale assessed reports of loving or supportive behavior, for example, hugs, kisses, or experiences of support or forgiveness. The rejection scale assessed reports of behavior intended to turn the child away from the parent, for example, avoidance, ignoring, or pushing the child away in times of need or affiliation. We developed two additional scales of dyadic partnership for use on the Adult Attachment Interview. These 5-point scales were based on Bowlby's concept of a goal-corrected partnership and our own previous research. A parent-child scale assessed the degree to which parent and child were described as enjoying each other's company and whether the child sought the parent as an attachment figure. The spousal scale assessed the degree to which the parents

were portrayed as a harmonious partnership in their roles as spouses and parents. These four scales - loving, rejection, parent-child partnership and spousal partnership, were then modified for use on children's doll play to permit comparison between the mothers' and children's representation of the family.

Doll play and interviews were rated by two independent judges. We found a strong correlation between the loving and partnership scales. These scales were combined and will henceforth be referred to as supportive partnership.

Our first question focused on the issue of intergenerational continuity. In line with what many people have thought and with the results of studies reported at this conference, we hypothesized that the child's representation of family interaction in doll play would be analogous the mother's memories of family interaction. We were surprised to find that correlations between doll play and adult interview scores failed to support our hypothesis. In search of an explanation, we re-examined our data. We discovered that half of our sample spontaneously reported having been in therapy. In retrospect this isn't surprising. You have to remember this is Northern California. In addition to therapy, one mother had recently experienced the loss of her own mother. These mothers were similar in that, theoretically, they had undergone an examination of their childhoods. As mentioned earlier, this process should result in modifications of childhood mental representations. If this is the case, the child's family doll play would not necessarily be expected to correspond to the mother's description of her family of origin. The remaining 6 mothers did not report spontaneously being in therapy. Since the Adult Attachment Interview does not ask parents specific questions about psychotherapeutic experiences, we cannot be certain that these 6 mothers have not also been in therapy. Even if they had, the fact they didn't mention it is notable and could suggest these experiences were not meaningful.

We again analyzed the data in terms of intergenerational continuity, this time considering "therapy" and non-therapy dyads separately. Note that the mother experiencing loss was included in the therapy group. As shown on Table 1 (foil #1), the correlations between doll play and interview ratings in the non-therapy group generally demonstrated continuity across generations, with the notable exception of maternal rejection. In contrast, the correlations of the therapy group ratings revealed that there was little or no correspondence between the child's doll play and the mother's interview. For example, in one case the mother remembers her single mother as unloving, rejecting, and as unable to participate in any kind of parent-child partnership. Her child, on the otherhand, enacts a family where both mother and father dolls are loving, supportive and are not rejecting. In one story the mother doll calls the doctor when the child is ill. In a later story the mother doll cries, lamenting the fact that her children are lost. The father doll searches for the children, finds them and returns home with them to an anxiously awaiting mother.

These data suggest that in the absence of conscious reconsideration of childhood experiences, the mother's and child's internal working models of their respective families are very similar. On the otherhand, when the mother has re-examined her family of origin, new models of the family are reflected in the child's doll play.

Our second question addressed the issue of differentiation of relationships. In our minds the family system is composed of discrete dyads. It is possible, however, that as enacted in the doll play that the child's representations of her relationship with her father and her parents' relationship as spouses are simply generalizations from her relationship with her mother. We needed to determine the degree to which mental representations were differentiated. We examined this question separately for each of

our two groups by looking at the intercorrelations between the dyadic measures within each generation. For example, the scores given for the child's representation for mother-child and father-child interaction were correlated; the scores given mother-child and spousal interaction were correlated. These intercorrelations are shown in Table 2 (foil #2). Consider first the non-therapy group. As you can see neither the child nor the mother appear to differentiate between relationships. That is, there were high positive correlations between all combinations of dyadic measures. It seems then for this group dyadic relationships are generalized in memory as either good or bad. The differences between parent-child and spousal relationships may seem obvious to us, but using this simple measure, both child and mother failed to differentiate between parent-child and spousal relationships suggesting that they view the experience between children and parents as qualitatively similar to the experiences between spouses. As you can see from the correlations, mothers in the therapy group and their children depicted qualitatively different parent-child and spousal relationships.

Because of these findings Judith and I were curious to see if we could determine which models of relationships had changed for those in the therapy group. Had the mother modified her mental representation of childhood attachment, or had she modified her representation of spousal relationships as well? In order to answer this question we generated change scores by evaluating the absolute differences between mother's and child's scores on the supportive partnership scales, that is, supportive partnership between mother and child and partnership between spouses. We considered a difference in score of greater than 1 scale point as a change across generations. The results of these comparisons are shown in the next table (foil #3). Change across generations is designated with the abbreviation "**CH**". Changes could be positive or negative. No change is noted by a circle (**O**).

For the therapy group, we found a change across generations in supportive partnership scores between mother and child in 6 out of 8 cases. We found a change in this measure in only 1 out of 5 non-therapy cases. This difference is significant at the .05 level using Fisher's exact probability test. We haven't been talking in terms of attachment classifications. But we know that many of you will be wondering how these change scores relate to classification. We found change in all attachment groups. In contrast, spousal relationships did not appear to change across generations. That is, the mother's memories of her parents' spousal relationship were re-enacted in her child's doll play. In most cases the parallels were quite clear. Children whose mothers remembered their parents as harmonious partners enacted scenes where the parent dolls sat together, vacationed together, and shared caregiving responsibilities. Children whose mothers remembered their parents as lacking a partnership rarely had the parent dolls interact during play.

In closing, I would like to draw four conclusions from our pilot study. First, family doll play proved to be a fruitful method for investigating the transmission of family patterns. The stories we used were designed to examine questions of attachment. Although children spontaneously played out family themes, we recommend that future researchers interested in using this method should consider creating more family-centered stories that would allow analyses of the entire family system.

Second, this is the first study to demonstrate a clear transmission of models of relationships at the level of representation. Researchers have inferred continuity in working models by comparing mothers' to interviews with children's behavior in the Strange Situation; but when looking at behavior there is always some ambiguity as to the mechanism of transmission. We have found intergenerational transmission at the symbolic level.

Third, continuity in intergenerational transmission is a function of childhood and current experience. Most studies to date have found continuity, in some cases across four generations. A few exceptions have begun to emerge in recent studies of attachment, marital instability, and child abuse. In contrast to trends of continuity, we were struck by discontinuity in over half our sample. Adult therapy appeared to be the major instrument of change.

Finally, it appears that children construct mental representations of both filial and spousal relationships that are potentially carried forward in subsequent generations. Looking more closely we found continuity in spousal patterns, even in cases where mother had reworked their internal working models of attachment. It appears, therefore, that changes in attachment models do not necessarily result in similar modifications of models of spousal relationships.

Table 1. Correlations between Doll Play and Interview Scales: Non-therapy vs. therapy groups

Scale	Non-therapy (N = 60	Therapy (N = 8)
Supportive Partnership with Mother	.87 *	-.30
Supportive Partnership with Father	.92 *	.34
Rejection by Mother	-.14	.33
Rejection by Father	.42	-.37
Spousal Partnership	.95 *	.04

* $p < .05$, two tailed test

Table 2. Differentiation of Relationships: Intercorrelations between Dyadic Ratings for Non-therapy vs. Therapy groups

		Non-therapy (N = 6)		Therapy (N = 8)	
		Doll Play	**AAI**	**Doll Play**	**AAI**
Mother-Child/ Father-Child	Supportive Partnership	.64	.91 *	.26	.94 *
	Rejection	.64	.89 *	.64	.47
Mother-Child/ Spousal	Supportive Partnership	.82 *	.97 *	.09	.26
	Rejection	---	---	---	---
Father-Child/ Spousal	Supportive Partnership	.86 *	.88 *	.28	.49
	Rejection	---	---	---	---

* $p < .05$, two-tailed test

Table 3. Change in Relationships Across Generations

	Supportive Partnership with Mother		Spousal Partnership	
	Non-Therapy	Therapy	Non-Therapy	Therapy
	p = .05		p = .15	
CHILD				
Secure	O	CH	O	CH
	O	CH	O	O
		CH		O
Avoidant	O	CH	O	CH
	CH	O	O	O
		CH		CH
Ambivalent	O	CH	O	O
	O	O	O	O

CH = Change
O = No Change